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SUBJECT: Oman H1N1: Five Dead, Confirmed Cases on the Rise

CLASSIFIED BY: L. Victor Hurtado, CdA, Department of State, Embassy
Muscat; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (U) SUMMARY. After the initial appearance of H1N1 in June the virus has spread significantly. Five deaths due to H1N1 are confirmed, out of more than 717 confirmed cases. The GoO has been relatively proactive in attempting to stem the spread of the virus. Businesses are not yet affected but contingency planning for staffing shortages is under way. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Dr. Sham al Bawikar from the Ministry of Health informed EconOff that there are over 717 confirmed cases of H1N1, considerably higher than the 550 reported in the press. Dr. Sham elaborated that the virus is concentrated in the South due to the density of the population and the number of visitors on holiday to the region. Dr. Sham added that there were 65 hospital admissions of those suspected to have H1N1 on August 22.

¶3. (SBU) The Oman Daily Observer, the Khaleej Times and the Times of Oman reported that there are a total of five deaths attributable to H1N1. The cases ranged from a 39 year old male to a 70 year old female. Four of the cases had preexisting severe illnesses. Dr. Sham indicated that one of the cases had no known preexisting illness and appeared to be in good health.

¶4. (U) The National Committee for Follow-up and Management of H1N1 is the GoO entity tasked with managing H1N1. The Committee is restricting distribution of antiviral medication to severe lab-confirmed cases of H1N1 or healthcare workers who have treated H1N1 patients within the last seven days. Laboratory testing for H1N1 is limited to patients who display severe symptoms, admitted patients with respiratory illness or pneumonia with unusual presentation and those emerging from newly affected geographical areas. Routine testing in other circumstances is indefinitely suspended. The GoO pledged to pay for testing and treatment costs for Omanis and expatriates.

¶5. (U) Khaleej Times, Oman Daily Observer and Times of Oman reported the delay of the school year. Omani schools were set to open August 29 but have now been delayed to start on September 26, after Ramadan. Ostensibly the delay is due to H1N1, however, Omani schools were the only schools in the Gulf set to be open during Ramadan. Expatriate schools have the discretion to decide when to begin their school year. The American school of Muscat (TASIM), which most embassy children attend, elected to begin school on schedule, August 24.

¶6. (U) Oman Society for Petroleum (OPAL) predicted that the outbreak is unlikely to have a significant impact on key economic

sectors. OPAL, which has approximately 300 members from the oil and gas industry, emphasized the need for strategic planning. OPAL suggested that companies make a contingency plan should there be significant staff shortages resulting from the outbreak reaching epidemic proportions.

17. (C) COMMENT. Following global trends, cases of H1N1 will likely continue to rise in the coming months. Should cases of H1N1 continue to rise unchecked, tourism will suffer. Although the GoO cites H1N1 as the reason for delaying the school year, the delay is more likely attributable to the GoO's wish to conform to other Gulf countries where the school year does not start until after Ramadan. The GoO's actions appear to be in line with WHO Pandemic Influenza Preparedness and Response Guidelines. END COMMENT.
HURTADO